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Marine engineers looks toward mission of rebuilding Iraq

Michael Coronado, The Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Calif.)

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FIX11

CAMP CHESTY, Central Iraq - The supply convoy moved closer to Baghdad and its inevitable mission of helping rebuild a war-torn nation.

In Humvees and dump trucks, Camp Pendleton (Calif.) Marines this week rode past adobe mud houses, charred cars and streams of children selling or trading blue packages of Iraqi cigarettes.

Along the highway, farmers and shepherders waved to the Marines as patches of brown landscape gave way to green barley fields. One young Iraqi defiantly saluted the engineers with his middle finger.

They also came across remnants of war. A scorched cement gun turret. A broken-down 7-ton truck. A lone black military boot.

The images on their trip to Camp Chesty served as a reminder that the 7th Engineer Support Battalion's postwar job is to mend fences as well as build faith among the Iraqis that the United States is more than just a war machine.

The engineers will fix roads and bridges and reconstruct irrigation canals and farmland. They also could be asked to build Red Cross humanitarian camps or even schools and clinics. The Marines will lay the groundwork for the military's primary construction crew, the Army Corps of Engineers.

Helping rebuild what Abrams tanks and howitzer artillery destroyed is a priority for 7th Engineer commanders. They will unearth sand dumped into irrigation canals to allow vital water supplies to once again flow to Iraq's farmland.

Cpl. Gregory Donaghe, a 21-year-old diesel mechanic, is motivated to do the rebuilding.

"It's really easy to bomb and destroy stuff," he said. "If some of us stay back, it shows the people that we weren't just here to kill."

Lt. Col. Scott Poindexter, the 40-year-old commander of the 7th Engineers, has a team of officers that will plan the reconstruction effort. One such officer is Maj. Will Wando, a former infantry Marine with a master's degree in engineering management. Before sunrise, Wando maps out the day for the engineers using colored markers and a giant whiteboard.

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Along with the other 1,000-plus Camp Pendleton engineers, Wando waits for the final word, which he estimates could come in a matter of days - the one that says the war is over and it's time to implement a cleanup plan.

"That's our responsibility," he said of the reconstruction.

Marine engineers know they will play some role in reconstruction, but just how long the engineers will stay is unclear. The Marines by nature are not a long-term expeditionary force. They are, commanders like to say, the most ready of all the military forces and the most adaptable, having been trained specifically to work without a steady resupply effort.

Throughout the world, Marine ships called the Maritime Preposition Force carry enough supplies to get the Marines into any country in a matter of days.

"Our flexibility is that in seven days, anywhere in the world, we can have a contingency, a force that can fight for 30 days," Wando said.

But the 7th Engineers don't have the ultra-heavy equipment used to build urban cities nor the civil engineer teams to design them. So the 7th Engineers lay the foundation for the Corps of Engineers to begin the rebuilding phase.

They will, however, probably move north to help repair airfields and replenish food supplies.

"I anticipate the Marines' presence will be six months or so," Poindexter said. "The reconstruction phase is the longest."

A short postwar stint for the engineers, who are strung out across a network of supply camps that stretch from Kuwait to Baghdad, is a welcome thought for these tired Marines.

At Camp Chesty, a huge supply depot near Baghdad that will serve as a command center for thousands of troops, the heat grows each day, the flies multiply and the vehicles break down more often. Some have called the desert home for six months now.

"Some people have been here awhile and morale gets down," said Pfc. Sheldon Hart, a 19-year-old Camp Pendleton Marine. "The worst part is I haven't had a shower in a week and a half."

Hart is a heavy-equipment mechanic and has been in the Middle East for nearly a month. He said he wants to go home, but not until the war is over and the engineers' job is done. His days are spent cleaning grease fittings and air filters in the heavy bulldozers and trucks used to build supply camps.